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RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 1294
RHMCSUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 4150
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RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 001578

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT-ORGANIZED PILGRIMAGE TO TURKMEN SHRINES

REFS: A) ASHGABAT 1527; B) ASHGABAT 1569

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11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for Internet distribution

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: Due to alleged concerns about the spread of the H1N1 virus, the Turkmen government decided to skip sending pilgrims to the Hajj ahead of Eid al Adha (Gurban Bayram) holiday, for the first time since 1993 (Ref A). Instead, the government organized an internal pilgrimage of a group of believers to Turkmen shrines. During an 18-day period, the pilgrims visited 38 shrines in all five provinces of the country. Local mass media provided daily coverage of the event. Although the authorities organized the internal pilgrimage because of swine flu concerns, locals believe that it will become an annual event, in addition to the Hajj in Saudi Arabia. END SUMMARY

13. (SBU) On November 6, President Berdimuhamedov issued a decree on the celebration of Gurban Bayramy (Eid al Adha), a major Muslim holiday. In accordance with the decree, November 28 - December 1 were designated as non-work days. Gurban Bayramy is usually preceded by the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia. In past years, the Turkmen government has annually sent around 180 pilgrims (one plane load) to Mecca on a government-sponsored trip. This year, however, due to Turkmen government concerns about H1N1 virus, the government decided not to send Turkmen pilgrims to Hajj. In addition, the government did not provide aircraft for charter flights to Mecca for self-paying pilgrims as it had in the past. Instead, the government organized a pilgrimage to holy shrines in Turkmenistan. A group of believers, consisting of elderly men and women, conducted zyyarat ("pilgrimage" in Turkmen) and visited 38 shrines in all five provinces of the country from

November 11 to 29. Upon Presidential order, the State Council on Religious Affairs, together with offices of provincial governors and Ashgabat municipal authorities, organized the pilgrimage and provided necessary logistical arrangements.

DASHOGUZ PROVINCE PILGRIMAGE

14. (SBU) The pilgrimage started in Dashoguz province by visiting the mausoleum of Nejmeddin Kubra, an ancient memorial complex "Uch Yuz Altmysh" (360 Saints), Ibrahim Edhem, Ashyk Aydyn Pir, Mahmyt Zamahshary, Ismamyt ata, and Bilal baba shrines. While in Dashoguz, the pilgrims also visited architectural monuments: mausoleum of Kutlug-Timur, Tyurabek-hanum, Tekesh, Il-Arslan, Seyit Ahmet, and Kyrk molla fortress. From Dashoguz, pilgrims flew to Balkan province.

BALKAN PROVINCE PILGRIMAGE

15. (SBU) In Balkan province, pilgrims visited Gyzoli ata, Aksynly mama shrines, Kaaba-depe madrasa, Ancient Dehistan historical complex also known as Mashat-Misserian, Shibli baba and Paraw bibi shrines, and prayed namaz prayer in Juma mosque. They visited the madrasa where sheikh Ali Ibn Sukkari used to teach and the Shir-Kabir mosque also known as Mashat mausoleum. Pilgrims also visited Serdar town where currently over 20 new social and cultural facilities are being constructed. From Serdar, pilgrims traveled to Mary province.

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MARY PROVINCE PILGRIMAGE

16. (SBU) In Mary province, pilgrims visited Gurbanguly haji mosque named after President Berdimuhamedov. The mosque opened in 2007. While in Mary, pilgrims held zyzzarat to Sahy baba shrine, visited "Yeke gowak" historical archaeological monument, Talhatan baba, Ojarly baba, Hoja Yusup Hamedany, Bureyde baba shrines, Soltan Sanjar mausoleum, "Ancient Merw" historical-cultural national park, and "Margush" complex of archaeological memorials. The pilgrimage then continued to Lebap province.

LEBAP PROVINCE PILGRIMAGE

17. (SBU) In Lebap province, the group visited Gaynar baba shrine, made an excursion to Koyten-dag national park, visited Kyrk gyz shrine and the Dinosaur plateau near Hojaypil village. The pilgrims also visited Astana baba, Idris baba, Daya hatyn, Abu Muslim shrines and read namaz prayer in Abu Yusup mosque in Turkmenabat, the administrative center of Lebap province. From Lebap, pilgrims proceeded to Ahal province.

AHAL PROVINCE PILGRIMAGE

18. (SBU) In Ahal province, pilgrims visited Saragt baba, Myane baba, Myalik baba, Gyz bibi shrines, the Seyitjemaleddin complex of historical monuments and Islam Nury mosque in Annau. They also made an excursion to Nisa state historical-cultural national park and Geokdepe fortress. On the final day of their pilgrimage in Ahal province, the group participated in the opening ceremony of the newly reconstructed Archman and Yyly Suw recreational sanatorium complex. President Berdimuhamedov attended the opening ceremony of the sanatoriums and hosted the first presidential sadaka

(ceremonial meal) in honor of Gurban bayramy. During the pilgrimage, sadaka dinners were organized in all five provinces for health of President Berdimuhamedov who had made the pilgrimage possible.

BACKGROUND

¶9. (SBU) Gurban bayramy is one of the popular national holidays in Turkmenistan (Ref B). Every Turkmen family that can afford to prepare a sacrificial meal is supposed to cook a meal and invite relatives, friends and neighbors to share a holiday meal. Youth is usually entertained by music, dances and swinging on large swings set in every community. It is believed that by swinging on swings, one atones his/her sins. Gurban bayramy dinner invitees are supposed to have a meal and say "Kabul bolsun" (May Allah accept your sacrifice). It is believed that to solicit the All Mighty's blessings for the next year, one has to visit seven houses and share in sacrificial meals at each. Turkmen also celebrated Gurban bayramy during the Soviet period, although at that time the government did not provide days off for celebrating the holiday.

¶10. (SBU) COMMENT: This year was the first time that the government organized a pilgrimage to local shrines. The entire pilgrimage in Turkmenistan was covered prominently by local mass media. According to some locals, the pilgrimage to

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local shrines might turn into an annual event, in addition to Hajj pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia. Still, no claims were made that the local pilgrimage was the spiritual equivalent of the Hajj, and popular demand for the Hajj in the future will most likely be as strong as ever, once health concerns are no longer a factor. END COMMENT.

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